

Developing a Strong Thesis for Your History Day Entry

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A **thesis** is an argument or a hypothesis — the main point of your work. The purpose of your work, in fact, will be to present evidence in support of your thesis. Everything about your project evolves from your *thesis statement*. State your thesis very early in your entry in a thesis statement.

Example of a weak thesis statement

“This paper is about the status of African Americans after the Civil War.” This thesis statement is weak because it does not take a position or make an argument.

Example of a strong thesis statement

“After the Civil War, many freed African Americans believed that their children would have substantially better lives and greater opportunities than they had had as slaves. However, their hopes for their children were not fulfilled; in the 1880s, the lives of most African Americans were not much better than those of their once-enslaved parents.

The second example above takes a position. It provides an argument with which people can either agree or disagree: that the lives of freed people’s children in the 1880s was not much better than their parents’ lives had been. Thesis statements can also be rephrased as position questions, such as: “Were the children of former slaves much better off than their parents?” Or “How much difference did the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution make in the lives of most African Americans?”*

Six Steps to Developing a Strong Thesis

Historian and editor Martha Kohl demonstrates how to develop a strong thesis in six steps[†]:

Step One

Think of a question that you want to answer. The question should be a “why” question, not a “what” question. What happened *is important*, but why it happened *is even more so*.

Example: You are curious about why there were fewer opportunities for women in the 1950s than during the 1940s. So your preliminary research question is “Why were there fewer opportunities for women after World War II than before?”

Step Two

Do preliminary research by reading secondary sources.

Example: As you conduct your research, you realize that other people have also looked at this issue. The consensus of the historians you read is that when male soldiers returned from fighting in World War II, most took back the jobs that women had been doing in their absence. In the shrinking, post-war economy, traditional employment attitudes gave men first priority over a limited number of jobs. During the war, women

working outside of traditional roles were seen as patriotic (doing their part for the war effort). After the war these same women were seen as stealing men's jobs.

Step Three

Refine or reformulate your question, on the basis of your preliminary findings.

Example: You realize through your reading in secondary sources that the question you have chosen has already been researched thoroughly by other historians. You agree with their answers to the question (and realize that the question is too big to answer in a ten-page paper). However, your reading has made you curious about other, related questions: "How did women respond to the shrinking number of work opportunities? How did they feel about returning to traditional jobs and roles?"

Step Four

Use your new questions to narrow and focus your topic.

Example: You may decide to look at a sampling of women from a specific city or geographic area, who worked in non-traditional jobs (as riveters, cartridge plant workers, etc.) during World War II and who later quit work to become housewives or to work other traditionally "female" jobs after the war. You decide to research their experiences to answer the following, more focused question: "How did women in this city feel about leaving the non-traditional jobs they worked during the war?"

Step Five

Continue your research with this narrower focus in mind, in an effort to find answers to your question.

Example: You find letters and diaries of some women who fit this narrower topic at your local historical society. You know some women who worked in the 1940s and became homemakers in the 1950s, and you decide to conduct oral history interviews with them. You also find published speeches relating to women's work, and some books and websites by historians who have looked at similar topics elsewhere.

Step Six

Test your research by developing hypotheses, or guesses about what the answer to your question will be. Don't be afraid to prove a hypothesis wrong or to modify it to accommodate new evidence.

Example: Before you started interviewing your oral history subjects and reading the letters, diaries, and published information about women in your case study, you hypothesized that they were pushed out of traditionally male jobs and that they resented it. After conducting more research, you learned that some of the women you studied wanted to be housewives, so you modified your hypothesis. You decided that a woman's response to leaving a traditionally male job after World War II may have varied depending on the type of job she had held during the war and the options she saw for herself in the 1950s.

Your hypothesis that women responded in a variety of ways to the change in their work status, and that those responses depended on the options they saw available for themselves, becomes the **thesis** of your paper. It is a strong thesis because it:

- ✓ is arguable
- ✓ evolved from your research and therefore you have evidence to support it
- ✓ is clear, focused and specific.

Refining your Thesis Statement

Here are some guidelines to remember when developing your thesis statement.[‡]

- Read what other people have written about a subject and consider one of two paths: argue against their findings, or show how your research supports in new and interesting ways what they have found.
- Develop a tentative thesis statement early on. Revise it if your research findings shed new light on your early questions.
- If you cannot phrase your thesis statement in the form of a “why” question, revise your thesis statement.
- Keep your thesis in mind as you conduct your research. It will help keep your work focused.
- Modify your thesis, if necessary, so that it explains what you find in your research. Don’t force your evidence to support or prove your thesis.

*Martha Kohl, “A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing a Good History Day Paper,” *OAH Magazine of History* (Spring 1992), 83.

†Kohl, 84.

‡Kohl, 84-85.